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Sent: Fri 5/27/2016 8:58:14 PM
Subject: From Greenwire -- OFFSHORE DRILLING: Pacific fracking poses no significant threat -- Obama admin

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OFFSHORE DRILLING:

Pacific fracking poses no significant threat -- Obama admin

Ellen M. Gilmer, E&E reporter

Published: Friday, May 27, 2016

Hydraulic fracturing in the Pacific Ocean won't have a significant environmental impact, federal regulators announced today.

After freezing permitting for fracking off California earlier this year, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement are set to greenlight permitting for the oil and gas production technique again -- finalizing an environmental assessment and a "finding of no significant impact" for fracking and "acidizing" the ocean.

The final assessment will be published in the *Federal Register* on Tuesday.

Environmentalists criticized a draft version of the study in February, calling it a " cursory" review that doesn't meet National Environmental Policy Act standards (*EnergyWire*, Feb. 23).

The review comes as part of a federal settlement with two environmental groups -- the Environmental Defense Center and the Center for Biological Diversity -- which filed separate lawsuits in 2014 and 2015 challenging the Interior Department's routine permitting of offshore fracking. The agency agreed to freeze permitting while it conducted the study.

The assessment, which was prepared by Argonne National Laboratory, considers the effects of offshore fracking on air quality, water quality, and marine and coastal wildlife, and analyzes the likelihood of accidents during well stimulation and fluid handling.

The report notes the option would have no noticeable air quality impacts, a "negligible" effect on greenhouse gas emissions, "slight" reductions in local water quality at the site of discharges, a low potential for earthquakes and "subtle toxic effects" on some animals within the discharge zone.

"The Obama administration is once again putting California's beautiful coast in the oil industry's crosshairs," said Miyoko Sakashita, director of the Center for Biological Diversity's oceans program, in a statement. "Our beaches and wildlife face a renewed threat from fracking chemicals and oil spills. New legal action may be the only way to get federal officials to do their jobs and protect our ocean from offshore fracking."

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